

## **The Racial Discrimination from Romantic Perspective: A Postcolonial Study of Langston Hughes's Selected Poems.**

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### **Abstract:**

.Postcolonial literary theory critically studies the cultural, societal and historical analysis and modes of discourse of the people of the colonies in Europe, Asia, Africa and the Third World. Moreover, postcolonial studies deal with forms of imperialism particularly the domination of some nations and people by other nations. Thus, "this rethinking of empire has brought the United States into focus as an object of postcolonial [studies] both as a contemporary empire and as itself a postcolonial nation" (Abrams, 1960:307,8). African-American studies, however, fit together well with postcolonial studies as it "forms a number of angels interrogates the relations between the west pretty much the rest of the world in the light of the history or Western expansion and military and economic domination" (Bertens, 2001:112). On this basis, it is possible to read and analyze the African-American literary themes through a postcolonial vision. However, the prevailing theme that most African-American poems tackle in common is the theme of racial discrimination, but it is rather meticulous to say what the poems share in terms of theme instead of mode.

The present study aims at examining Langston Hughes's selected poems to judge whether the modes of these poems are romantic or racial and the motive behind this. This will give a better understanding of the personal and the psychological factors that affected the life of the African-American individual in the heyday of the racial segregation.

### **1 - Introductory Note:**

Langston Hughes (1902-1967) is one of the innovative African-American figures in the twenties and the early thirties of the last century. However, in an interview Hughes affirmed that his work always aims "to interpret and comment upon Negro life, and its relation to the problem of democracy" (Wagner; 1973:393). In Hughes's conveying the African-American life there is a romantic system of modes inconsistent with reality. He, like the Romantics, uses romantic characteristics giving a primary concern to imagination and individual feeling. Moreover, he uses romantic

features within the structure of the poems such as the setting of the poem ,imagery, symbols, language and" beholding the infinite with the stream of nature itself, instead of apart from that stream ....as apotheosis of that cosmic flux" (lovejoy,UD:4).On the other hand, the themes of the selected poems are racial in that it talks about oppression, the sense of inferiority, the problem of democracy longing to the past, the African-American past and alluding to slavery in an indirect way. Both features of mode and theme are intermingled within the same poem, they go together.

## 2 - A Study of Hughes's Poems.

Hughes's "The Negro speaks of Rivers"(1925) demonstrates the power of blackness and Hughes's quest for the universal. For Hughes lets the racial anxiety and demands of the white American go together in a universal context. He dramatizes the depth of the black's spirit eschewing racial essentialism while nonetheless assuring the present racialized conditions of the African-American people celebrating their identity. Moreover, Hughes, in this poem, pictures the historical trip of the African-American to the united states employing rivers as a metaphorical source of life and demonstrating the African-American heritage and strength.

"The Negro Speaks of Rivers" signals instances of Romantic strategies in that the structure of the poem is an association of ideas and material things such as the connection of the African-American experiences with the rivers. Furthermore, the setting of the poem is a Wordsworthian landscape in that the rivers refer to time that is the African-American history and they by themselves the metaphors that suggest the mystical union of the African-American people. Moreover, how the river, the Mississippi, looks contribute to the total impression which comes from the fusion of the African-American life with the natural object, the river. It is definitely could be described according to what the Romantic nature poets consider an aim that is to read meaning into the nature.(K.Wimsatt;UD:31).

The poem was composed while Hughes was on a train arriving ST. Louis crossing the long way from Illinois moving along the Mississippi into Missouri, the place where Hughes was first born. While on the train and after a gloomy day, the sun was setting. The beauty of the setting and the sparkling of the muddy river, the Mississippi, in the sun, the cloudy

summer hour, the movement of the train toward the dark, all moved in Hughes's imagination the feeling of beauty and death, the feeling of hope and depression. A word sparkled in his mind, then a sentence and after a short while Hughes wrote the whole poem:

Now it was just sunset, and we crossed the Mississippi, slowly, over a long bridge. I looked out the window of the Pullman at the great muddy river flowing down toward the heart of the South, and I began to think what that river, the old Mississippi, had meant to Negroes in the past—how to be sold down the river was the worse fate that could overtake a slave in times of bondage. Then I remembered reading how Abraham Lincoln had made a trip down the Mississippi on a raft to New Orleans, and how he had seen slavery at its worst, and had decided within himself that it should be removed from American life. Then I began to think about other rivers in our past—the Congo, and the Niger, and the Nile in Africa—and the thought came to me: “I’ve known rivers,” . . . as the train gathered speed in the dusk, I had written this poem, which I called “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” (Parham; 2007:434).

Thematically, the magical transformation of the Mississippi from mud to gold by the radiance is mirrored in the transformation of slaves into free men by Abraham Lincoln's (1809-1865) proclamation (Onwuchekwa, UD.). The rivers stand for the Afro-American's spirit. Their ceaselessly flowing water is a metaphor of the Afro-American stoicism. They represent the endurance of the African-American deep soul. For water in a larger metaphorical sense represents the profound imagination that people have in that the water is deep and flowing:

I've known rivers:

I've known rivers ancient as the world and older than the  
Flow of human blood in human veins.

My soul has grown deep like the rivers (CP.1-4).

Through its allusions to deep dark rivers and the suggestive use of imagery, the subject matter of the poem mimics Walt Whitman's (1818-1892) philosophy that is "only the knowledge of death can bring the primal spark of poetry and life" (Onwuchekwa; UD.). Death and the love of life are simultaneously suffused, and they are sung at the same time. So, on the

basis of Whitman's phrase, Hughes is a poet who "sings of life because at last he has known death" (ibid). He thinks of his people and his relation to them in a nostalgic way which is a romantic poetic mode.

The overriding tone in the poem is timelessness in that there is an affinity between the spirit of the speaker and the human history in general and the African-American history in particular. The rivers are as ancient as the world and their names evoke the site's meaning. Three of them are in the countries of the black peoples. Furthermore, naming certain rivers and works achieved by the side of these rivers is an implication of the whole African-American history, in Africa, and slavery without mentioning the word slavery. In the first two lines of the second stanza the poet speaks of ordinary works a man does in the place where he lives naturally. "*I bathed in the Euphrates/ I built my hut near the Congo*" (Oktenberg; UD.). But in the two lines that follow there is a shift in meaning and there is a message. Lifting the pyramids above the Nile is a hint to slavery, for it is a work of slaves, "*Abe Lincoln went down to New Orleans*" may be connected with the American slavery (ibid). In other words the vision of a regained freedom forms a part from the African-American history and it is not directly expressed:

I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young.  
I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep.  
I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it.  
I heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln  
Went down to New Orleans, and I've seen its muddy  
Bosom turn all golden in the sunset (CP.5-10).

In a universal context, the flowing of the Euphrates from eastern Turkey recalls the advent and downfall of the Roman Empire. "For over two thousands year the water helped delimit that domain" (Miller; UD). While the Congo represents a barrier in Africa between White and Black. The same goes with the Nile and the Mississippi. The Nile springs from south east Africa and flows towards the north of Egypt into the Mediterranean. The Mississippi river flows towards south east from northern Minnesota to the Gulf of Mexico. The different wards of the rivers, south, north, east and west suggests the fertility and the places which are vivid of African-American life. However, Hughes describes the Mississippi with a strong

racial indication by both the brown color of the river that is the usual color and by the historical meaning of the river that refers to slavery in that traveling along the Mississippi means the way to the slaves auction blocks. According to Hughes himself, The Mississippi is the place where Abraham Lincoln(1809-1865)"had seen slavery at its worst, and had decided within himself that it should be removed from American life'(Hughes;1940:55 qt.in Rampersand):

I heard the singing of Mississippi when Abe Lincoln  
Went down to New Orleans, and I've seen its muddy  
Bosom turn all golden in the sunset(CP.8-10).

Furthermore, "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" is a recognition that Hughes is a poet of racial ideas. For the sense of negritude, the politics of the Black power and how and what the African-American think of are present in the poem. These ideas are embodied in this poem and combined with the very essence of the revolutionary spirit of the African-Americans. The poet dramatizes the historical experience of the African-American people in extreme way in that "The' I' of the poem is not that of 'a' negro but 'the' negro, suggesting the whole of the poem and their history"(Oktenberg; UD.).Every single element in the poem contributes to the idea that when the Negro speaks of rivers he speaks with a massed wisdom of a wise man. The importance of the wise man is that he conveys, proudly but secretly, the long African-American history and celebrated tradition to the younger generations to privilege from the past for a better future.

"The Negro Speaks of Rivers" discusses Lincoln's and the life of slavery in the context of a son-father relationship "for the poem is an internal dialogue with his father whose strange dislike of his people baffled and disturbed Hughes, and, of course, implicated his son as an object of that dislike"(Hughes1986:37-40qtd.inRampersand).The relationship between Hughes and his father has both personal and political dimensions. Personally, it is a crisis of independence in that Hughes's vision concerning Blacks and Whites is different from that of his father. While on the political level, it discloses the rejection of the Blacks man by Whites.

Asa Harlem Renaissance poet, music is a main characteristic in Hughes's poetry. The type of music which is evident in his poems is the blues, in both mode and theme. He says that the blues is "sad Funny songs-too sad to

be funny and to funny to be sad[for it contains]laughter and pain, hunger and heartache"(Diyanni;2004:721).

"The Weary Blues"(1926),is one of Hughes's celebrated poems for it includes, in its structure, a blues lyrics.Hughes describes a blues player and his song concentrating on the relationship between the speaker in the poem and the blues performer. There is a clear relationship between the speaker and the player of a piano. This relationship is implicit due to the vague syntax in the poem (Beach,2003:120). Moreover ,the poem is a journey beyond the limits of the racial stereotype to the lyrical style expressing the flipside of the lyrical sense .For the word *Weary* in the title of the poem suggests tiredness with strength and patience.

However, Hughes presents the less welcome aspect of the romantic image of the blues player. He recalls a romantic view of spirituality. For the relationship between the blues singer and the speaker in the poem is a spiritual one.Hughes, in this poem,has what some of the romantic poets want to have which is the soul of things- a brilliant romantic instance is Wordsworth's"Tintern Abbey".It is the poetizing of the spiritual via understanding the meaning that leads to the literal truth of the things. In this spiritual view Hughes keeps focus on the literal meaning of some words and phrases like *O Blues* to keep the attention and by which he starts the poem and gives an effect which lies in the very philosophy of the soul and the sensible imagination. In such type of spiritualitythe poet considers himself the ideal man who creates by his own intellectual imagination important facts of the African-American experiences.

The setting of the poem is at a bar in Lenox Avenue, a main street in Harlem city in New York:

Droning a drowsy syncopated tune,  
Rocking back and forth to a mellow croon,  
I heard a Negro play.  
Down on Lenox Avenue the other night  
By the pale pallor of an old gas light  
He did a lazy way....  
He did a lazy way....(CP.1-7).

The words *drowning* and *rocking* may suggest the "I" of the speaker or the Negro which the music calls him to take part.Moreover, the words explain the nature of the blues player as a "*drowsy syncopated tune*". The blues

player remains independent for he is not a well known player which is in a larger metaphorical meaning an indication to the African-American people. Furthermore the words infer the difference between the romantic image and the actuality of the speaker's life. The three words help the blues singer find out the origin of discrepancy between his endurance to his life conditions and his call to accept them as expressed in his blues lyrics:

To the tune o' those Weary Blues,  
 With his ebony hands on each ivory key  
 He made that poor piano moan with melody.  
 O Blues!  
 Swaying to and fro on his rickety stool  
 He played that sad raggy tune like a musical fool  
 Sweet Blues!(CP.8-15).

What the bluesinger wants to reveal is the deep Afro- American spirit. For the blues is the thing that keeps him alive. He plays with a deep and strong feeling trespassing the racial barriers "making the poor piano moans with melody"(Beach;2003:120).It discloses and moans the black monotony and sorrow which mean the strength and beauty of the black traditions. The traditions of blues that express the life and nature of the blues player. When he sings the blues he sings about his life and how to live with and love the white community. When the black hands play the white piano, the performance is changed. (Tracy;UD.):

Coming from a black man's soul.  
 O Blues!  
 In a deep song voice with a melancholy tone  
 I heard that Negro sing that old piano moan-  
 "Ain't got nobody but ma self.  
 I's gwine to quit ma frownin'  
 And put ma troubles on the shelf."(CP.16-22).

The poem ends with a line that explains the feeling that the speaker is unable to understand the emotions which create this form of performance. For the emotion is not equal to the expression itself. The speaker of the piano player sleeps a lone like a rock or dead man. The last line of the

poem, then, takes no notice of the blues speaker's ability to speak of his painful life conditions or to endure them:

And far into night be crooned that tune.

The stars went out so did the moon.

The singer stopped plying and went to bed

While the weary Blues echoed through his head.

He slept like a rock or a man that's dead(CP.30-35).

However, like the romantic poets, nature has a bulky part in Hughes' imagination which is clearly recognized from his romantic description of the natural things or phenomena. "Sunset-Coney Island" is a combination between the romantic thinking of the sunset which is expressed by the beautiful colors that are a natural result of the tropical settings and depicting of the follies and hardships of life. Hughes describes the sunset, here, in this poem, by watching the different side of the sunset. The speaker depicts the sun as a rotten smelling thing:

The sun,

Like the red yolk of a rotten egg.

Falls behind the roller-coaster

And the horizon sticks

With a putrid odor of colors(CP.1-5).

Then, the speaker in the poem talks about a man who is a tailor from the Bronx on the beach throwing up the food who ate in the afternoon. The man is described as being very fed up with the hardships of his life:

A little Jewish tailor from the Bronx,

With a bad stomach,

Throws up the hot-dog sandwiches

He ate in the afternoon

While life to him

Is like a sick tomato

In a garbage can (CP.6-12).

Finally, the poem is a message that is beyond the beauty of life, there is a difficulty, hard conditions and ugliness. Largely, like the life of the



African-Americans in the 1920s and the time of the great economic depression in 1929.

However, almost all of Hughes's poems have strong bonds between Hughes himself and Harlem, a small sector in New Yorkcity. Moreover, Hughes looks at Harlem in a romantic way that is "Harlem sums up in itself[Hughes's] every theme and all the aspects of his highly divers personality...yet he is also much more than that, for in his work Harlem is symbol as much as reality"(Wagner;1973:474).

"Harlem"(1956) is one of Hughes's most celebrated poems. It tackles the most recurrent themes in Hughes's poetry which is the African-American dreams. Dreams of equity and equality. The poem, however, was latter entitled "Dream Deferred" and the relationship between Harlem and the African-American dreams is a symbolic one in that "the Negro dream is a mitigated form of the American dream and that, forming a parallel to Harlem, that black islet in the midst of a white islands, it is a tiny dream lost from sight within the great American dream"(ibid:453).

The poem reflects the African-American mood which prevailed after two great events that people in America experienced. These events are the great economic depression and the second world war. For African-Americans are completely occupied by life free of racial segregation but their dreams do not come true. It is postponed:

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up

Like a raisin in the sun?

Or fester like a sore...

And then run?

Does it stink like rotten meat?(CP.1-6).

The poet, in this poem is motivated by the fate of a *dream deferred* .The first line of the poem raises a philosophical question about what happens to dream deferred. Examining the poem closely discloses the original disconnection of the poem which is a basis of an unsettled disagreement. In conveying this, Hughes employs different structures in the content and the form of the poem that, together with the form contributes to its meaning He asks a powerful rhetorical question which is followed by a silence to evoke the image of a deferred dream, "He imagines it drying up, festering ,stinking, crusting over or finally, exploding"(Kristen; UD.) Each one of

these images is clear enough to the extent that it makes us feel and taste these delayed dreams. First, he uses the image "dream dries up like a raisin" to liken the genuine dream to a grape which is sweet and juicy when it is fresh, but it is beyond reach when it dried up because it is unachieved. Then, the next image, *fester like a sore/and then run?* suggests a meaning of something that causes or get disease and pain. Likening the dream to a pain infers that the African-Americans become obsessed with the unattainable dreams. The dreams of justice and good citizenship like an incurable wound. The word *fester* gives the meaning of decay and the word *run* implies a sense of soaring high and becoming far-fetched. The poet's view indicates the frustration that one feels when his hope always vanishes. Moreover, the image *Does it stink like the rotten meat* increases the degree of a feeling of dislike:

Dearm within a dream

Our dream deferred(CP.12-13).

Hughes remarks to the effects of neglecting or preventing the African-American dreams which are disastrous ones. According to Hughes himself "a discarded dream does not simply vanish, rather, it undergoes an evolution, approaching a physical state of decay"(Kristen; UD). Thus, the poem "Harlem", provides a clear vision of the African-Americans' life conditions in the 1960s, the period of the civil rights movement.

### 3 – Conclusion

To sum up, Hughes is a poet who views his own romantic ideals. He is the super idealist who creates a sense of spirituality by his own imagination. In poetizing his discomfort Hughes does not write in modes which is less romantic than the modes that he follows. Inspired by some ethical temper which is essential in Christianity, he Romantizes the agonies in his life such as the way he is dealt with as a second hand citizen. However, Hughes thinks of the African-American life from a different point of view. He lives, basically in the eyes of the outer world and in conformity to it. As an individual, he makes himself one of the American society and refuses to stand apart from it. His visions results in reflecting, in his poetry, a collective states of mind of his own from which comes his modes of interpretation. What Hughes tries to interpret is the exact limits of the African-American individual. The single African-American definition that Hughes wants to recognize is the origins of his people, their history and their part in the civilization that they are part of. This labels Hughes racially as a poet of masses.

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## التمييز العرقي

دراسة في ما وراء المستعمرات لقصائد مختارة لنانكستن هيوز

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### الملخص:

تتناول نظرية ما وراء المستعمرات التحليل الاجتماعي، الثقافي والتاريخي واساليب الخطاب لشعوب المستعمرات في أوربا، آسيا، أفريقيا والعالم الثالث. تتعامل نظرية ما وراء المستعمرات مع أشكال الامبريالية وبالتحديد سيطرة بعض الأمم والشعوب على بعض الأمم، " لقد جلب هذا التفكير بالامبريالية الولايات المتحدة الأمريكية لتكون موضوعا محوريا لدراسات ما وراء المستعمرات كونها إمبراطورية معاصرة وكونها ، ويحد ذاتها، إمبراطورية ظهرت بعد الفترة الاستعمارية" (أبرامز: ٨، ٣٠٧).

حيث تتلاءم الدراسات الأفريقية الأمريكية وبشكل جيد مع دراسات ما وراء المستعمرات؛ لأنها تشكل عددا من الزوايا التي تبحث في العلاقات بين الغرب وبقية سكان العالم من منظور تاريخي أو من حيث التوسع الغربي والهيمنة العسكرية والاقتصادية" (بيرتنز: ١١٢). وعلى هذا الأساس فمن الممكن قراءة وتحليل الأفكار الأفرو أمريكية من خلال رؤية هذه النظرية، ما وراء المستعمرات. ومن جهة أخرى فإن الفكرة الأدبية السائدة في اغلب القصائد الافرو أمريكية هي التمييز العنصري. ولكن من الصعب قليلا القول إن ما تشترك فيه هذه القصائد هو من حيث الفكرة بدلا من الطريقة.

ترمي الدراسة الحالية إلى إثبات فيما إذا كان الشاعر يتبع طرائق رومانسية في القصائد المختارة وهل أن الأفكار عنصرية وكيف يكون ذلك والدافع من وراء استخدام الطرائق الرومانسية .ان معرفة ذلك سيعطي فهما أكثر للعوامل الشخصية والنفسية التي أثرت على حياة الفرد الأمريكي من أصل أفريقي عندما كان التمييز العنصري في أوجه.